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ABSTRACT

A description is provided of Elgin Community College's (ECC's) effort to involve community leaders in environmental scanning. Introductory comments explain the use of a community forum to bring 252 local leaders to the campus to start off a year-long planning activity by developing a database of information on economic and social trends. After explaining how ECC's environmental planning process differed from typical environmental scans, the paper discusses the strategy used to recruit local experts for the half-day forum and the range of socioeconomic sectors they represented. The next section discusses the format of the forum, which used small groups to identify 281 socioeconomic events, trends, and developments, and a large assembly to review the trend and priority statements developed by the small groups. After describing how the college's planning task force discussed, analyzed, and further synthesized the raw trend statements into nine key trends relevant to the college's future, the paper explains how these key trends were used to develop preferred future scenarios for the institution. Concluding comments stress the importance of the community forum, which stimulated staff members to look outside the institution while promoting community involvement with planning processes. An outline of small group activities, sample trend statements, and a list of the nine major external trends are attached. (AAC)

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A creatively personalized nomination process, a gourmet breakfast, a signed photo print and a promise of feedback from participation in a community think-tank combined to bring 252 local leaders to Elgin Community College's campus for a Saturday morning of environmental scanning. This large turnout was the kick-off phase of a year-long futuring/planning activity designed to utilize an external trend data base as the beginning point in the College's effort to respond more effectively to economic and social changes of the 1980's. The success of the college's strategic planning process rested heavily on the obvious affective and also high quality information outcomes from the half-day community forum. The forum was a locally tailored, extremely detailed which resulted in a highly credible trend report.

Environmental scanning is now an acknowledged important data gathering step in most college's strategic planning activities (Morrison, Renfro, Bruches, 1983). When conducted on a community-wide basis, as at Elgin, environmental scanning produces planning trends relevant to leaders in and outside the college as well as a positive interaction between a college and its community.

Environmental scanning is much less mysterious than it appears when the planners carefully follow its basic principles. Scanning involves examining a large number of variables relevant to the college and the socioeconomic environment surrounding it. The resulting data base is analyzed to extract trends from which to make predictive conclusions. Positive actions can then be planned to exploit rather than be victimized by the trends.

Typically environmental analysis and planning are done by a small group of institutional research staff and financial planners. Elgin Community College designed the environmental planning process to capture the ideas, perceptions and data from many regional experts. A broad range of college staff organized and facilitated the process. This process increased staff exposure to and understanding of community issues, while, simultaneously, community experts gained an impression of college staff as carefully listening to them as outside experts. The database produced by this exciting community-based approach was 281 individual trends ranging across 21 socio-economic sectors. Community leaders were themselves eager to use this valuable information about their own enterprizes. The affective outcomes of the process for the college resulted in increased community prestige as well as greater staff awareness.

Why was a forum approach used? How were 250 community

forum participants recruited? What were the strategies used to gather data from the experts? What types of trend data were identified? How were the trend data utilized by the college? These questions are often asked by those from other community colleges who hear of the Elgin experience and want to revitalize their own college planning.

RECRUITMENT STRATEGY

A community forum of local experts was chosen by the college's president because of several features. This approach was designed to create ownership by important local residents in the college's change process. Secondly, this grass roots approach provided a comprehensive external view of the total community's socio-economic activity. Third, the involvement of college staff in recruiting the experts insured that key college staff would listen to the final outcomes of the process. Fourth, important college community networking was developed for follow-up activities related to other college needs such as equipment donations, leaders for future fund raising efforts, credibility of financial needs of the college, and the identification of human resources to tap as part-time instructors and advisors. Lastly, utilization of community experts to identify external community trends would provide a more

valid data base than the traditional approach where college researchers glean out trends from scattered, largely out-dated, written documents.

Recruitment of the appropriate mix of community experts started with a college steering committee to oversee the process and identify socio-economic sectors important to the college's future. This start-up activity insured comprehensiveness and utility of the database. Elgin Community College's critical 21 sectors were identified (see table 1) and college staff recruiters were matched to these sectors based on personal background, professional expertise and interest in them. Staff were asked to contact people they knew in the region for nominations of community experts who could help the college plan for the future. Each recruiter was asked to identify through his or her contacts 8-10 experts.

Table 1

Twenty-one Socio-economic Sectors

Public	Government Education Taxing Bodies Corrections Energy Media
Private	Agriculture Economic Manufacturing Health Entrepreneuers
Social / Family	Cultural Recreation Social Services Religion
Special Interest	Blacks Hispanics Elderly Pan Asian Handicapped

College expert recruiters found their contacts were responsive and positive about identifying key people to participate in the forum. It was vital that each significant sector be adequately represented and geographically diverse to fill its portion of the database. Most commitments to participate were made over the telephone. When an area expert agreed to participate, the name and address were captured and the first of two letters from the president was sent. A second letter of reminder was also be sent out shortly before the meeting. The steering committee's prediction of 180 participants was quickly revised to 240. On the day of the forum a total of 252 area experts arrived for the forum process. Peer pressure among community leaders hearing of the event became so great that they began volunteering and asked to accompany previously assigned subordinates.

FORUM DESIGN

Forum planners were careful to design a participatory, positive and interactive process for the experts. Key principles and ideas for effective group process were selected from writings of Dr. Ron Lippitt, professor emeritus from University of Michigan and co-founder of the National Training Laboratory of Bethel, Maine. The final agenda for

the half-day (actually 2 1/2 hours) experience listed these major activities:

- Buffet Breakfast
- Orientation to Morning's Activity
- Small Group Process - brainstorm, identify events-trends-developments, trend statements, priorities
- Large Group Assembly to Review Other Group outputs
- Closing Comments

The heart of the activity was the small group process where college staff served as facilitators. In many cases these facilitators were the expert recruiters. Adequate training was critical to smooth professional performance and gathering of data in a consistent, useful format. Before the forum, each of the college facilitators participated in an hour training session to review and practice the five-step trend identification process utilizing activities from the publication Choosing the Future You Prefer (Lindaman and Lippitt, 1979). See Table 2 for a summary of these key steps.

The first key outcome to be achieved from these 21 small group meetings was the identification of important events, trends and developments (ETD's) that were presently occurring today in the community. Building on these EDT's

the second, and most useful outcome for the college, was the identification of key trends which the group predicted would occur in their socio-economic sector over the next 5-10 years. A total of 281 trends emerged from this hour long participatory session. The last step for each group was to prioritize their trends by the degree of confidence which they felt the trend would occur. In later stages of planning, high priority trends cutting across several sectors have the most significance.

Central to the success of the small group process was the trained facilitator, use of a fast moving positive pace and the promise of feedback to the participants of their own and other groups' data. Individual sector reports and the overall trend analysis for the district were promised and delivered with a letter of appreciation from the president within two months.

Following the conclusion of the small group activity, data from other groups were posted and concluding remarks were offered to all participants.

TREND DATA

The trend data gathered during the forum was organized and edited by college staff. Sensitivity to maintaining the original language and writing style was a constant con

cern of the editors. A final document, Community Futures Forum Trend Statements (Youngren, 1983), was published and sent to all participants. Examples of trend statements from some of the socio-economic sectors appear in Table 3.

Many of the trend statements did not at first analysis seem useful to the college's planning. However, many staff reflecting on trend statements from several sectors began to see interrelationships to their departmental planning activities. Institutions from the community requested copies of the trends and reported them to be useful and valid to their planning activities.

These raw trend statements were discussed, analyzed and further synthesized by the college's planning task force. Eventually the 281 statements were consolidated into 9 key trends (see Table 4) relevant to the college's future. The last step in the environmental scanning process was merging of these community trends with college-wide trends reported by staff. A final listing of the 7 "planning megatrends" was the final outcome of this first phase of the college's futuring/planning process.

This trend building phase is a part of a larger planning process used at Elgin (Willett, 1984). In the second phase, staff utilized the megatrends as a framework to generate their preferred future scenarios for the college.

The last phase included the entire staff in judging the most important scenarios so that traditional action planning could be based upon achieving them.

CONCLUSION

The community forum environmental scan step was an important and necessary ingredient in the college's efforts to stimulate staff to look outside the institution while at the same time to use widespread community involvement in the college's planning effort. Feedback from participants ranged from "great" to "superb." Sample evaluative comments were: "excellent;" "the group leading strategy was great;" I think overall it was an excellent process;" "well-organized, well-executed;" "everyone really helped and was motivated;" "the breakfast was terrific!"

Important spin-offs from the forum have occurred. A practical, useful report was produced (Haring, et.al 1984). A major equipment donation prospect was identified and new members for the college's advisory committees were recruited. The president for weeks after the meeting received favorable comments orally and in writing. The most important spin-off from the forum, however, was the energy which the event triggered in the college staff to complete the final phases of the college's strategic planning process.

Table 2

Small Group Process - Key Steps

Step	Activity Description
1	Brainstorm on concerns and things which please you about your life, your community and society.
2	Brainstorm on the key events, trends, developments which you see going on in your work and in areas related to your work.
3	Review of all of the brainstorm data.
4	Group discussion on key trends which will occur during the next five years.
5	Group agreement on most likelihood of key trends occurring.

Table 3

Sample Trend Statements

	SELECTED TRENDS
GOVERNMENT	1. Decentralization will continue. 2. Accountability of officials will be increasingly stressed. 3. Citizen self-reliance will be a focus of local government.
ENVIRONMENT/	1. Cost of utilities will increase and consumers will receive better service. 2. Use of energy will be stabilized. 3. Increased networking and cooperation among environmental, education, public utilities, and building designers.
AGRICULTURE	1. Continued efforts to enhance farm image and to promote farm commodities. 2. International policies will continue to impact farm marketing goals. 3. Evolution needs to occur in banking systems to meet audit needs of the farmer as in nation and size of farms increase.
LABOR UNIONS	1. Employees will participate more in setting work conditions and benefits. 2. Negotiations will emphasize security and fringe benefits. 3. Increase reliance on arbitration to solve management labor problems; a decreased reliance will be placed on the courts.

Table 4

Major External Trends

1. Federal cutbacks, limited growth in tax bases and the static midwestern economy will put great pressure for accountability on social service agencies, education and government.

2. Individuals will choose and/or be forced to take greater responsiblity to solve health, emotional and social problems through wellness-oriented behavior, self-help groups and voluntarism.

3. Increased unemployment will put stress on families, social service agencies and local governments.

4. The demographic shift to an older population will be increasingly important in all spheres of life.

5. Availability of trained workers and retraining of unemployed workers will be a key to economic growth.

6. Demands for increased product productivity and higher quality on managers as well as workers will be felt in business.

7. Cost of living, especially energy costs, will continue to be of concern to families, businesses and governments.

8. Personal isolation and quality of life in the community will be concerns for families, social service organizations and educational institutions.

9. Developing greater technological sophistication, better management techniques, effective use of information services and increased computer literacy are the dominant problem solving forces identified in the scan.

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